



City of Mount Pleasant, Michigan
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY



September 27, 2013

Senate Committee on Local Government and Elections

RE: SB 313

Dear Senators:

On behalf of the City of Mt. Pleasant, I respectfully request that you oppose Senate Bill No. 313.

The City of Mt. Pleasant is the home to Central Michigan University with total student enrollment exceeding 20,000. In support of the University there are approximately 6500 rental units located in a six square mile area of the city. The majority of the properties are occupied by students as off campus housing.

The City of Mt. Pleasant takes pride in our fire safety record in rental properties. The last student fire fatality in off campus housing occurred over 18 years ago. We attribute this excellent fire safety record to our annual rental property licensing and inspection program. Currently we charge for the annual license, but the fee covers less than one half of the cost to administer the program. Our Housing Licensing ordinance is drafted with provision for owner responsibilities as well as tenant responsibilities. Tenants are held accountable for violations that they create, not the property owner.

SB 313 would limit local control, by limiting frequency of inspections. The bill treats all municipalities as being the same and violates the basic principle of local control, when actually many municipalities have vastly different rental-housing environments, particularly those with colleges or universities. Student housing has been the focus of national media attention including USA Today *Alcohol and Fire a Deadly Mix* August 30, 2006, ABC News *Why are so Many College Students Dying in Fires?* January 28, 2006 and the Detroit Free Press *Where College Students Live: How Safe is it?* December 20, 2005.

According to the U.S. Department of Education there are approximately 18,000,000 students enrolled in 4,100 colleges and universities across the country. There have been 162 campus-related fire fatalities reported since January 2000, with 86% of those fatalities occurring in off-campus housing. (*Campus FireWatch Fire Safety Information Sheet* April, 28, 2013). *Campus Firewatch* is an organization created to provide a central focal point for campus fire safety.

Campus Firewatch identified five common factors in these off-campus fatal fires:

- Lack of automatic fire sprinklers
- Missing or disabled smoke alarms
- Careless disposal of smoking materials
- Impaired judgment from alcohol consumption
- Fires originating in upholstered furniture and decks and porches.

These findings are supported by data from the *National Fire Protection Association Fire Protection Handbook*, Section 5, Chapter 7, on Campus Fire Safety:

- Students often engage in risky behaviors without supervision or experience to guide them, often contributing to the incidence of fire.
- Students often have a sense of invulnerability that can be difficult to overcome.
- One of the most significant problems identified on inspections is the disabling of smoke detectors.
- Off-campus housing facilities have a lower level of scrutiny and a potentially lower level of fire safety.
- To keep individual cost of housing low students frequently share rooms, apartment and houses creating a larger number of occupants than otherwise would be expected.

Underwriters Laboratories Inc. has also become involved with the problem of fires in student housing. The *Operation Life Safety* May/June 2005 newsletter issues a reminder to college students from *Underwriters Laboratories Inc.* about the importance of fire safety. UL identifies the following as the most common causes of fires in student housing:

- Careless smoking
- Unattended candles
- Cooking
- Overloaded extension cords
- Students living closely together

How do we mitigate these hazards and provide for an increased level of fire safety for college students, by regular inspections in addition to other prevention strategies. The *National Fire Protection Association* recommends in part, the following prevention strategies to create a fire-safe environment:

- Evaluating/Inspecting student living spaces with the goal of reducing fuel load and ignition sources.
- Ensure on and off campus occupancies meet the minimum fire safety codes and standards.
- Because of changing environments and constant turnover of students, it is necessary to monitor conditions in occupancies regularly.



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To summarize the most effective prevention strategy to identify and mitigate fire hazards in off-campus occupancies is performing regular and frequent inspections as recommended by the *National Fire Protection Association*. SB 313 would limit local ability to perform these needed inspections.

To assist the City of Mt. Pleasant and similarly situated communities maintain our excellent record of fire safety, and to meet NFPA inspection recommendations I ask you to oppose SB 313.

Respectfully,

Gregory L. Walterhouse

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Fire Chief